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Contrasting excellence in Homer with philosophical midwifery

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Abstract

The discovery of a rational way for effectively resolving problems encountered in the quest for personal excellence has far reaching implications for philosophy and culture. As a new paradigm for understanding human problems, philosophical practice using philosophical midwifery constitutes a major shift of emphasis that returns reason and the arena of mind to the center of our concerns. Philosophical midwifery, an extension of Socratic midwifery, is non-interpretive dialogical exploration for overcoming the blocks in the struggle to achieve excellence. The method of Philosophical Midwifery (PM) surfaces unsuspected false beliefs, discovers what factors made them believable, accounts for what maintains them and, in recognizing the way they function, brings about their dissolution. Following the methods of PM, this paper describes Achilles' problem in terms of the present situation that manifested the problem, the pathologos (sick belief) state of mind, the transmission scene, dealing with the consequences of the pathologos problem, and reconciliation with oneself (in this case, the funeral games and Priam).

Introduction

The good life is open to all through the participation in mind, for this is what illumines our struggle to achieve *arête*, excellence. It is natural to encounter difficulties in this struggle and they must be overcome if excellence is to be achieved, but if they block one from achieving that excellence they can be called problems. Philosophical midwifery is a rational method for resolving those problems, it provides a way to understand how the mind functions (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p.21) and as such it is a new paradigm for understanding human problems (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 21). In applying the principles of philosophical midwifery to Homer's *Iliad* (P. T. Murray's 1924 translation) we can recognize, in Achilles' struggle to overcome his blocks, that Homer not only traces nearly all the key stages of uncovering problems outlined in philosophical midwifery, but includes a stage that was overlooked in philosophical midwifery. The implications of this thesis for philosophy and culture are obvious since the legitimacy of the idea of progress and that of the evolutionary nature of thought and culture fall into question.

Philosophical midwifery (herein referred to as PM), as mode of Philosophical Practice, is an adaptation of Socratic midwifery. It is a non-interpretive dialogical exploration that has been taught and practised for overcoming the blocks in the struggle to achieve

excellence¹. These blocks are the learned false beliefs about oneself, which we have named the pathologos.

They function as a monad in that they link with others, becoming a key component of the self image that is inimical to and irreconcilable with one's higher and more profound goals, one's quest for personal excellence (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 133). The dissolution of those false beliefs, or blocks, depends upon understanding how unsuspected injurious false beliefs about oneself become believable. Discovering how they are the source of our failures to achieve excellence frees the mind of those hindrances and opens a vista for exploring the furthestmost reach of the mind, which is one of the goals of philosophy.

In Plato's *Republic* (P. Shorey's 1935 translation), the fall of the aristocratic state is caused by members of the ruling family undermining the child's self image and of his perception of his father (p. 56). While Plato does not offer any insight into why such sophistry became believable to the child, he does capture the transmission of that idea. Those who transmit such teaching pretend to be knowers of the truth and they do their best to convince others of its truth. Indeed, one of the central philosophical issues explored in the dialogues of Plato is the unmasking of the sophist as a pretender to knowledge. The high point of the sophist's art is fashioning the irrational to be acceptable to the believer as if it were rational and true. However, we can see the irrational beliefs unfold in Homer's *Iliad* because behind Achilles' anger it is possible to understand the dynamics of the origin and dissolution of his ruinous false beliefs about himself, which we will trace to his early learning experiences. For, once Achilles was able to reject the powerful influence of early learned false beliefs he was able to become truly heroic and to achieve human excellence.

In our analysis of Homer's *Iliad*, we will demonstrate that Homer's understanding of human nature is consistent with PM. For it can be and was offered as a model to help those struggling to achieve excellence. Once man is free of the crippling constraints of belief, it is possible to take the challenge to express an excellence.

The dynamics behind Achilles' problem we all share whether they exhibit themselves in extreme or lesser forms. For just as the blinding rage that Achilles felt over experiencing injustice kept him from seeing its destructive folly so too we are blinded by our own feelings of resentment and revenge over the injustices we have experienced in our own past (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 41). The perpetuation of these sullen grievances diminishes our capacity to enter into mindfulness.

The method of PM surfaces these beliefs, discovers what factors made them believable, accounts for what maintains them and, in recognizing the way they function, brings about their dissolution. As a result the method of PM brings about an understanding of the significance of functional understanding and can put an end to the suspicion that mind is incapable of understanding its own problems.

The method of PM was the subject of a validation study, which concluded that the long held belief that a purely rational approach is incapable of raising significant levels of emotionalized behavior and of being empirically verified must be rejected (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 273). The study affirmed that its methods could bring about fundamental changes in the human psyche without being psychological, since psychology does not include learned beliefs as causes of psychogenic behavior. We shall compare the principles of PM with Homer's *Iliad*.

The class of human problems that manifest themselves in the pursuit of one's highest goals are the result of the transmission of early learned false beliefs of the family-clan which had become a central part of the child's limited self image (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 21–32). The timing of the imposition of the transmission is when the child innocently and in an open receptive state of mind violates or goes beyond the boundary of the image that

the family-clan has of themselves and their place in the world (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 27–28). The transmission scenes are carefully selected so that parental figures, or their surrogates, can give their most convincing appearance of being sincere, caring, and knowing, which for the child then becomes the model for love, caring, and knowing (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 27–28). There is no need for violence or punishment in these scenes, since they are designed only to convince the child to abandon the direction they were exploring (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 37).

In sharing their fundamental concerns the parental figures appear their noblest and most sincere so that the picture they present of themselves is one of being virtuous (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 24–25). In seeing those we love sharing with us what they love and what they have learned about life we believe the truth of what they say and we are converted to their beliefs. The child forfeits their freedom, assumes a role within the limits of the family image and defends it loyally (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 92). However, the child knows they have compromised and that is the origin of the sullen rage against authority (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 38–43). Thus, while the child gains acceptance within the family-clan structure, the price the child pays is not to question the process since the examination of its origins would surface the grounds of its acceptance. Agreeing, if even implicitly, to the curtailing of the mind from any examination of this belief structure becomes an avoidance and fear of the cultivation of the mind (Grimes, 2004).

The loyalty to the pathologos belief becomes a badge of honor and whenever circumstances are sufficiently parallel, or analogous, to what was transmitted in these past learned scenes the believer will defend the belief vigorously, believing the challenge to be an outrage against injustice, an affront against their honor, and a justification for ruinous revenge (Grimes, 1998). The suffering, the grief, and turmoil that spins out from revenge is the cycle that begins with anger (Grimes & Uliana, 1998, p. 31). It is through the exploration of the dynamics of the cycle of anger that we can gain insight and understanding of pathologos problems.

When the believer is brought to see the full consequences of their pathologos-belief, they experience a deep and profound shock. If the believer can then bring themselves to see that the tragic circumstances of their life was the consequence of blindly adhering to their false belief then it is possible for them to emerge from the shadows of belief and test their understanding in those very situations that previously blocked them. Again, if this is achieved the believer becomes a new person with a new vision of life. This is the story of Achilles because he was able to move out of the fury and turmoil of rage and revenge, and into a mindful excellence.

Following the methods of PM we shall describe Achilles' problem in terms of (1) the present situation that manifested the problem, (2) the pathologos state of mind, (3) the transmission scene, (4) dealing with the consequences of the pathologos problem, (5) reconciliation with oneself and Priam.

(1) The particular circumstance that manifested Achilles problem began in the ninth year of the Achaeans assault against Troy. Agamemnon, the general of the Achaeans, refused the ransom that Khryses, the priest of Apollo, offered him for the return of his daughter, Kyrieus. Achilles, the commander of a legion of Myrmindons under Agamemnon, confronted him openly, taunted him, and ridiculed him for not giving back the girl and collecting the ransom (I 118, I 145)². In retaliation for Achilles posturing as an equal with him (I 285–290) and for having to return Kyrieus, Agamemnon forced Achilles to give up his own beloved Briseus, whom Achilles called his wife (IX 334–346). Achilles was furious at Agamemnon for being dishonored, for the loss of Briseus, and for being treated as an

underling. Driven by the need for revenge he refused to fight and sat idly by watching the destruction and slaughter of the Achaeans in battle (I 230).

(2) In the pathologos state of mind there is the sense that one is protected and honored by one's identification with the pathologos. The parental figures or their surrogates each contribute to the development of the pathologos state of mind, for it becomes the model for the behavior of the child through which they learn to express love, honor, and power. In the acts of the pathologos drama, we note that the subject does not necessarily act out a mirror copy of the model, but rather the dynamics of that drama. The enactment of the PM drama will follow, or react to, the episodes regardless of who plays them out, for in the playing out of the drama it justifies the original transmission and its tradition.

Achilles believes that his brief existence as a mortal was somewhat balanced or compensated for by the belief that honor was his due since his mother, Thetis, was a goddess. He pleaded with his mother to gain Zeus' compliance with his scheme for revenge because he reminded her that she alone among all the Gods and Goddesses had saved him from being shackled (I 350). Thus, Achilles believes Zeus honors him and that Zeus' justice would sustain him through all his exploits (IX 618), and this is his pathologos. As a consequence he believed that even with the final collapse and destruction of the Achaeans forces that Hector, the son of Priam and defender of Troy, would spare him and break off combat around his black ship (IX 688). However, the state of mind of Achilles also includes love. Through the suffering of his loss of Briseus he confesses that he loves and cares for her (IX 350) so it is not alone dishonor he experiences with her loss to Agamemnon, but love.

(3) The Transmission Scene can be recalled, or the family members may retell it, and while those who transmit it are not aware of the implications of the transmission, they do share in the responsibility for transmitting it. In the retelling of those early transmission scenes the speakers often include their own past so that it is possible to trace back a transmission through many generations and to view it as part of a continued tradition. During the transmission scenes, or the retelling of it, the players must appear sincere, caring, strong, resolute, and, most importantly, different from the way they normally function. In sharing their basic beliefs, they appear their noblest and most sincere so that the picture they present of themselves is one of virtue in seeing those we love sharing with us what they love and what they have learned about life we believe the truth of what they say and we are converted to their beliefs.

Homer does not provide the reader with Achilles' reflections on early transmission scenes that had shaped his self image, but Lord Phoenix recalls his surrogate mother-nurse and mentor role in his visit of the emissaries to the tent of Achilles (IX 520–525). In reminding Achilles of these roles he reveals that he sought to make Achilles his own since he was unable to father children of his own (IX 490–495). He recalls that he too was involved in a love triangle. Phoenix tells that his father loved a slave girl (i) analogously to Agamemnon with Briseus. Phoenix's mother pleaded for assistance (ii) as Thetis did. Learning of the affair his father was furious with his son. Phoenix (iii) was about to put a sword to his father but some God held him back (iv), so too with Achilles. Unable to deal with the fury of his father Phoenix escaped (v) just as Achilles planned to do. Clearly, each of these five episodes can be seen to have their parallels and offer models for the drama of Achilles, consistent with the transmission of the pathologos. Phoenix continues with the tale, mentioning another legendary hero, Meleagros who was also consumed with anger and refused to do battle. He urges Achilles to return to battle, reap the rewards, and gain honor before it is too late. Clearly, Achilles' problem was understood as typical of a certain class of warriors but he went beyond the boundary of what was acceptable (IX 523–526).

Achilles mother, Thetis, a goddess, learning of the insult to her son bemoaned the day of his birth. While she accepts responsibility for his birth into this evil (I 400), she urges him to keep his anger burning against the army, and to quit the war. She then agrees to seek Zeus' support for his plan of revenge. Achilles believes that he is favored by Zeus and, therefore, is not persuaded that he should seek and exemplify honor among men (IX 618).

(4) The need to face the consequences of the pathologos problem brings an end to the problem and with it the recognition that we must bring a reconciliation of our ideals with the life we live. In accepting the responsibility that since the deeds done had sprung from oneself, and that the driving force behind the pathologos was one's own false belief, the pathologos can end. Returning to those who were responsible for the transmission of the pathologos, facing them, or their surrogates, and explaining the reasons for rejecting the false belief severs the bond that kept in place the pathologos. Clearly, Achilles, after mourning the death of Patroclus, confronts his mother and shares his understanding that any honor he has received through her is without benefit (XVIII 79–95).

After gaining new armor from Hephaestus' workshop Achilles still experiences his anger and is eager for the joys of battle, but Thetis urges him to tell his troops his anger against Agamemnon is over. He calls the troops together and announces that he has dropped his anger. Agamemnon also ends his anger and offers many more treasures to Achilles over his return, but Achilles is no longer concerned with whether he receives them or not. He re-enters the war and slays Hector, regaining his honor, but it is honor without benefit. The goal is won, success is achieved, but the story goes on because there is something more important that is still undone.

(5) The reconciliation is a completion; it brings together the fragments denied and hidden from view. Homer draws attention to these missing pieces in the penultimate chapter through Achilles calling forth the games to commemorate the funeral of Patroclus (XXIII 70). In the concluding chapter Homer focuses on the episode with Hector's father, Priam, and it is here where we find that Homer brings into a unity the excellence of Achilles. In contrasting the conflict in war with the competition in the games, we are able to see Achilles masterful in both realms. In the games, we create a world separate from the bitter competition in life and the terrible conflicts in war. In games, we play and compete for honor fairly and justly; in games, we consecrate our efforts to achieve excellence to the divine and, before the games, we honor fallen comrades in war and peace. Thus, through games we commemorate what we judge most significant. Each game has its own boundary, its own rules of fairness, and if there is question of an outcome, we abide by the decisions of impartial judges. Within this world the sportsman displays his excellence in skill, strategy, courage, cool headedness, and determination to win while, in contrast, war has only that one final and complete standard, victory or defeat.

Achilles announces the games will honor Patroclus, that he will be the judge, and will offer as prizes the treasures he had taken from his past spoils of war, thus demonstrating that he honors truth and excellence in the games (XXIII 270). The Achaeans applaud and show their own sense of *arête* during the games. As judge he also functions to quell rising antagonism among betting spectators (XXIII 490), adjudicates a conflict over awarding prizes when guile rather than skill succeeded (XXIII 600), and acknowledges and honors victors in past games (XXIII 650). The Achaeans themselves call off a vicious wrestling match to avoid serious injuries and Achilles in agreement awards each of the contestants equal prizes (XXIII 800). In a contest between rank and superior skill he avoids the inequality and calls for a draw offering both prizes (XXIII 895). Clearly, Achilles demonstrates a sense of justice, clear headedness, and a respect for his society's values.

Achilles' revenge is finally unmasked showing the deep and powerful presence of pain, sorrow, and suffering of those caught in the web of the pathologos. When Priam goes to Achilles to plead for his dead son's body he reminds Achilles of his aged father, Peleus, and that this long war with Troy has left him vulnerable to war and to ruin. Achilles is reminded of the toll his plight has taken and it awakens his grief over the death of Patroclus, the sorrow they have caused others, and they release the deep feelings that they have carried. Achilles and Priam weep over their loss (XXIV 520), they console one another and their pain is gone. Achilles shares with Priam that the gods ordain the destiny of man, both misfortune and affiliations, and man struggles with his fate as he carries out the designs of the gods (XXIV 527). For, in Homer's *The Odyssey* (R. Fitzgerald's 1961 translation), as we are told by Alkinoos, Lord and Model for all the Phaiakia, the Trojan war was Gods' work, "so that it should make a song for men to come" (VIII 562), and so now in singing it once again we can more deeply appreciate the profound insight that Homer displays in his understanding of the struggle to achieve human excellence.

As a result of this study of Homer we found in Homer what we had ignored in our own practice of philosophical midwifery. We now include the need for subjects to attempt a reconciliation with those who have been brought to grief over the enactment of one's problem. We also bring up for reflection the need to wonder about the struggle with one's fate, whether or not we have a destiny to fulfil, and if we are part of an intelligible and caring cosmos.

Notes

- 1 Philosophical Midwifery has been taught as a part of the programs offered by the Noetic Society Inc. since 1978. The students in this program learn to explore their problem-blocks through the application of a series of questions designed to uncover one's false beliefs. See, Grimes (1994, July, Nov/Dec).
- 2 Murray, P. T. (Trans.). (1924). *Homer, The Iliad*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Please review the referenced footnote from the Loeb edition "Many scholars stop after "eiler", on the ground that Achilles must not be assumed to speak of Briseis as his wife "alaoxos". This is to spoil the splendid rhetoric of the passage."

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